

## Consciousness

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Speaking about reading is risky, but speaking about reading and consciousness is even riskier. If reading is only beginning to take shape in scholars' minds as a circumscribed phenomenon worthy of concerted research scrutiny, consciousness itself has been disputed for centuries. How does consciousness work? Do people have it in the first place? And how does it relate to reading?

The mechanics of human consciousness – this notional interface between one's brain and the physical world – has wide-ranging interest for various domains of mundane life. In healthy drivers, temporary disruptions can cause fatal accidents. Disputes in criminal court often boil down to the question of whether the accused party, or a witness, actually could perceive a given thing or consciously act in a given situation. Behind the current rise of various meditation techniques is the promise that they will make us less oblivious, increase our consciousness. Reading is another such domain, because insight into the workings of consciousness is key to the effectiveness of any script-based education. The buzzwords associated with issues of literacy and learning today – attention, meta-cognition, self-regulation, and so forth – all relate closely to the phenomenon of consciousness.

These buzzwords emerge at a time when scholars are beginning to accumulate evidence in support of the view that one's general learning ability, as well as one's empathy and personality development, benefit strongly from the

habitual reading of stories and novels. For example, psychologists Suzanne Mol and Adriana Bus conducted a meta-analysis of ninety-nine different empirical studies comprising data from over seven thousand participants aged two to twenty-one.<sup>1</sup> They found that leisure reading not only increases one's learning ability, but also that its positive impact on learning increases with age; the older a person is within the given range, the more it matters for their learning achievement whether they read for leisure or not. Other studies, such as experiments by David Comer Kidd and Emmanuele Castano, show that the reading of novels, and especially literary ones, enhances one's empathy skills in the short and long term.<sup>2</sup> Following the warnings of literacy experts, however, there is talk about the momentous decline of these beneficial "deep reading" leisure practices.<sup>3</sup> The "depth" that we are allegedly losing as a side effect of the digital turn refers, again, to nothing less than our consciousness as we read.

But what do we know about the particular state of consciousness of readers absorbed in fictional narratives, whether in print or on screen? We worry about its frailty and importance for sustainable society development, but we know very little about its nature. In what follows, I review and partly contest three ideas about how consciousness works when we read and understand stories and novels. Each in its own way, these ideas tend to inform how long-form reading is discussed and taught today. Firstly, I revisit the general notion that the reading consciousness is a container of sorts, containing a circumscribed amount of textual stimulus. Secondly, an argument is presented against the view that readers commonly abstract their personal concerns away in reading literary text, and that they do so with benefit. Thirdly, I show how the reading consciousness encompasses rather than excludes the physical situation and environment of reading. For each idea revisited, practical implications will be

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne E. Mol and Adriana G. Bus, "To Read or not to Read: A Meta-analysis of Print Exposure from Infancy to Early Adulthood," *Psychological Bulletin* 137, no. 2 (2011): pp. 267-296, doi:10.1037/a0021890.

<sup>2</sup> David Comer Kidd and Emmanuele Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342, no. 6156 (2013): pp. 377-380, doi:10.1126/science.1239918.

<sup>3</sup> Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai, "The Importance of Deep Reading," *Educational Leadership* 66, no. 6 (2009): pp. 32-37.

discussed in terms of how reading could be taught, assessed, and staged in educational settings.

### Reading as a Way of Being

Simply put, consciousness is what our brain “knows” about a given situation it is in. In relation to non-conscious phenomena (say, the onset of a migraine), consciousness adds a subjective feel of what these phenomena are like (it hurts). One pervasive notion in the field of literacy seems to be that when we read a stretch of narrative, our consciousness is a container of sorts. As we make our way through the text, its contents gradually pour into our consciousness (and to a large part spill out again). Trained readers’ minds may also take up various higher-order and formal aspects of the text in addition to the basic gist. The more important information should ideally stick in our mind, the container, for future use. This is how our reading ability is also measured with various instruments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Test administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>4</sup> The more facts we retain in short-term memory, and the more comprehension and analysis questions we correctly answer immediately after reading a story, the more conscious and valuable our reading is understood to have been.

The container metaphor is partly fitting; in the instant of testing, some facts about the text can be retrieved from memory (those that stayed in the container) while others simply cannot (those that spilled out). However, it tells us little about how readers experience stories and novels when they are in the midst of reading, especially if they undertake it for leisure, outside any testing situation. The reading consciousness is then more like a sieve moving back and forth through a viscous medium, I propose, than like a container taking in a continuous stream.

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<sup>4</sup> OECD. *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2016).

Individual differences aside, leisure readers do not seem to spontaneously remember much detail of the novels they read:<sup>5</sup> the exact sequence of events, the core of every conflict, names of places or characters, or the name of the author for that matter. Such is the case especially if the novels are lengthy and perused in portions over extended periods of time. Often leisure readers do not even recall these details when explicitly asked to do so in retrospect. This is not necessarily because these readers' consciousness, their immersion, was not "deep" enough, but because they might largely read novels without a prior view to remembering anything in particular. I will return to this idea shortly; but first, a story in support of the sieve metaphor.

Spontaneous memories of complex narratives tend to be discontinuous and haphazard with respect to what is "objectively" important, although they have been shown to sometimes cluster around nodal story points such as moments of conflict resolution between characters. One type of phenomena that tends to stick for longer in the reader's mind (in its capacity as container) is mental imagery.<sup>6</sup> For the sake of illustration, let us assume that listening to a story is similar to reading one silently, an argument I have detailed elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Many years ago, I heard a lecture elaborately citing a story from an honorable literary source, the author or title of which (appropriate enough for this discussion) I never remembered. In that story, a laundress in the distant past is washing sheets by a river. A priest comes by and delivers a sermon to her while she is working. When the sermon is finished, he asks if she remembers what he said. She replies that she does not, in fact, for the sermon was like the river washing through her sheets; it sieved through her, and her soul is now cleansed nonetheless. While I would fail a test on the further context of this story snippet,

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<sup>5</sup> Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, "Minding the Text: Memory for Literary Narrative," in Lars Bernaerts et al. (eds.), *Stories and minds: Cognitive approaches to Literary Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 23-37.

<sup>6</sup> Karen A. Krasny and Mark Sadoski, "Mental Imagery and Affect in English/French Bilingual Readers: A Cross-linguistic Perspective," *Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes* 64, no. 3 (2008): pp. 399-428, doi:10.3138/cmlr.64.3.399

<sup>7</sup> Anežka Kuzmičová, "Audiobooks and Print Narrative: Similarities in Text Experience," in Jarmila Mildorf and Till Kinzel (eds.), *Audionarratology: Interfaces of Sound and Narrative* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 217-237, doi:10.1515/9783110472752-014.

the image of liquid content washing through the mind was so embodied and powerful that for an instant I felt the repeated impact of cold water in my chest as I listened. This sensation, together with what I have come to consider as the story's true characterization of narrative reception in general, is what makes me remember the snippet after more than a decade.

The mental image froze my consciousness of the story at a particular point in time, preserving some of it for future reference. As my anecdote suggests, mental imagery is a powerful instrument to cognition. Indeed, large-scale surveys by Suzanne Mol and Jelle Jolles<sup>8</sup> have shown that our individual propensity for mental imagery relates closely to reading enjoyment, and to academic success overall. However, much of high quality reading time can go by without vivid mental images. During this time, it can prove difficult to say what was in our consciousness at any given point. Suppose you are reading a hypothetical novel X where a new minor character has just been introduced. Were you conscious of the three adjectives defining this character a couple of lines back, or did you make your way through them automatically? Which adjectives were they? It might appear that as you read them, you were still reflecting on the main protagonist's philosophical thoughts that were articulated in the preceding paragraph. And yet an indistinct sense of that new person has somehow been added to your story experience. It is in this respect that the reading consciousness is more of a sieve (or a thinned sheet being washed in thrusts) than a container.

My example might seem to suggest that you never were conscious of the descriptive passage in question; that much of long-form story reading actually happens non-consciously and lacks depth at all. Many readers, however, would likely recognize having read a literary descriptive passage if they encountered it verbatim a hundred pages later in the same novel, a phenomenon that puzzled philosopher and literary theorist Roman Ingarden nearly a century ago.<sup>9</sup> How can the passage seem familiar if you do not remember noticing it the first time

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<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Mol and Jelle Jolles, "Reading Enjoyment Amongst Non-leisure Readers Can Affect Achievement in Secondary School," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5, no. 1214 (2014): pp. 1-10, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01214.

<sup>9</sup> Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth Olsen (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

around? And how come experiments such as those of Kidd and Castano show habitual readers of fiction to be profoundly transformed by reading in the long term, despite having access to so little of their text experience, both in the act and in retrospect?

Philosopher and psychologist Susan Blackmore proposes a view of consciousness that is helpful in grasping the paradox. Blackmore is concerned with consciousness in general and does not address the activity of reading. In its unparalleled complexity, however, reading provides a wealth of intriguing examples relevant to her idea. In Blackmore's account, humans typically neither lack consciousness, as some thinkers radically believe, nor have it in the form of a continuous stream of conscious experience, as most other people think. Blackmore argues that what appears like our stream of consciousness – for example, the feeling of text pouring smoothly into the notional container of our mind – is an illusion conjured in response to random probes later on. The nature of a probe will necessarily determine how past experience is reconstructed. On this understanding, trying to pinpoint the precise “contents” of one's consciousness in retrospect, as people are expected to do with confidence in court, is misguided. Let me quote one of Blackmore's examples:

In a noisy room full of people talking you may suddenly switch your attention because someone has said “Guess who I saw with Anya the other day – it was Bernard.” You prick up your ears – surely not – you think. At this point you seem to have been aware of the whole sentence as it was spoken. But were you really? The fact is that you would never have noticed it at all if she had concluded the sentence with a name that meant nothing to you.<sup>10</sup>

The problem in reading long-form narrative is that the number of verbal probes that can guide one's grasp of the preceding text – the direction in which the sieve of consciousness will be thrust next – is endlessly higher than in the processing

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Blackmore, “There Is No Stream of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 9, no. 5-6 (2002): pp. 17–28, <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/imp/jcs/2002/00000009/F0020005/1274>.

of Blackmore's two-clause utterance. In light of this insight it seems a mystery how any two people can ever come close to converging in their subjective experience of a story or novel.

Many scholars, such as Philip Davis or Marco Caracciolo,<sup>11</sup> are working toward a better understanding of this mystery. In contrast to what I have tried to convey here, they emphasize the power of literary language to transform one's unruly text experience into a shareable stream, that is, momentarily to halt the sieve of consciousness and turn it into a container. The importance of such research cannot be stressed enough. However, the vast disparity of PISA reading outcomes and other literacy indices, across and within classrooms and countries, suggests that the alleged power of literature might not affect every pupil indiscriminately. Not without a reading pedagogy that takes proper notice of how consciousness works – or does not work. As part of testing and other classroom practice, such pedagogy would introduce probes and questions about texts *prior* to reading rather than afterwards, as PISA and similar measures typically do. It would also integrate systematic training in mental imaging as an aid to both memory and pleasure.

#### Reading as a Way of Being Yourself

The next idea that I will discuss here pervades – especially but not exclusively – the higher tiers of reading education, in literature classes at secondary schools and universities. It is the idea that when you set out to interpret a novel or story, you can and should abstract away from the various contingencies of your current situation. For most of the twentieth century, academic literary studies were dominated by the notion of the so-called “affective fallacy,” which derided idiosyncratic responses based on personal life experience.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary research agendas like the one of Philip Davis focus precisely on the ability of literary fiction to lift one's mind out of its personal concerns in order to rekindle it to existential themes such as mortality, which are equally valid to us all. Less

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Davis, *Reading and the Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Affective Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 57 (1949), no. 1, pp. 31–55.

literary reads, in turn, are sometimes notoriously dubbed “escapist.” They are thought to make readers forget about real life altogether, *including* the fact of their mortality. For both the literary and non-literary cases, there is an assumption that the reader’s preexisting self becomes largely overridden in consciousness by interpersonal meanings.

In my view, more credit should be given to the reader’s sense of self when we think about how narrative informs our consciousness. Even Susan Blackmore’s simple anecdote speaks to the importance of personal relevance as our mind picks out stimuli for conscious processing. Blackmore says, “you would never have noticed (...) if she had concluded the sentence with a name that meant nothing to you.” Evidence from empirical studies of reader response suggests that in the complex process of story reading, it can be similarly difficult to tease apart the question “What does this mean?” from the question “What does this mean *to me*?” In leisurely book talk, the conversational floor is often divided according to real-life experience and expertise. When discussing a story set in a medical environment, for instance, reading groups tend to be (naturally) most eager to hear the insights of the doctors in their midst.

I would even go further in suggesting that for many leisure readers, the added value of narrative lies not in the invitation to forget oneself (Davis’ chosen perspective), but to momentarily become conscious of one’s self and one’s problems in specific ways that may be less readily available otherwise. It is a known fact that outside academic contexts, people report reading literature in order to identify with characters and their shortcomings, to cope with difficult situations, and to learn new things about life (rather than about literature in some abstract sense). This is what they say about their preferences when filling out surveys, and what they tick in questionnaires *after* being exposed to texts in experimental studies.

But how do these different personal realizations inform consciousness in the very course of reading? Often enough, they may come in the form of propositional thought (“Oh my, this character is acting just like me”). Just as often, however, they may assume the form of mental imagery. My previous example was of a mental image closely adhering to the wording of a given narrative – liquid content sieving through me like the river through a sheet,



precisely as the laundress said. Many of the mental images that occur to us in reading may, however, adhere to wording only loosely. Instead, they feed on our personal memories triggered by the narrative. If my associations to the word “river,” say, had made me briefly imagine the chilly swims I used to take with my grandparents in the (rather viscous) Elbe river when I was a child. Uffe Seilman and Steen Larsen, two psychologists who studied personal responses to text in the 1980s, coined the term “reminding” for this type of conscious associations.<sup>13</sup> As to format, reminders can be just about anything – snippets of encyclopedic knowledge, word chains, or melodies such as the tune of an old song with the word “river” in it.

Perhaps the most important finding of Seilman and Larsen and their successors is that the reminders of truly affect-laden, personally lived experiences are much more common in literary narrative compared to other types of reading materials, and that their frequency directly affects the pleasure taken in reading. The latter is paradoxically true for reminders of negative personal experiences, especially. Thus, depending on our situation, a given story or novel will yield – among many other things – a more or less intense parade of conscious thoughts, memories, and images in which our very selves play an active part. It is in this sense that literature affords a unique form of self-consciousness, in which you focus on yourself and yet you do not, because the story you are reading is really about others.

Most scholars of literature and reading, including some of those who study live readers’ experiences, would classify reminders such as my Elbe memory as “diversionary”<sup>14</sup> and akin to mind wandering. Indeed, there is evidence that such memories can divert students’ attention from a particular poetic device in a text, hampering literary analysis. But it would be untenable to argue that they are diversionary with respect to one’s mindset when opening a book for pure leisure, which is seldom geared to anything so specific.

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<sup>13</sup> Uffe Seilman and Steen F. Larsen, “Personal Resonance to Literature: A Study of Reminders While Reading,” *Poetics* 18, no. 1-2 (1989): pp. 165–177, doi:10.1016/0304-422X(89)90027-2.

<sup>14</sup> Shelley Sikora, Don Kuiken, and David S. Miall, “Expressive Reading: A Phenomenological Study of Readers’ Experience of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 5, no. 3 (2011): pp. 258–268, doi:10.1037/a0021999.

As for the analogy with mind wandering, a phenomenon that reportedly takes up as much as a quarter of normal reading time,<sup>15</sup> reminders would again represent a rather special case. According to philosophers of consciousness Zachary Irving and Evan Thompson, the one distinctive feature of mind wandering is that it is “unguided” thought.<sup>16</sup> This means that when your mind begins to wander, the topic of your thought will be prone to change while there will be no regulatory force to reinstate the initial topic. In narrative reading, however, there is indeed a regulatory force to keep your reminders in check: the text. As long as the text holds the reader’s interest, their consciousness will keep returning to it. At the same time there is proof, as mentioned above, that without the mind being prompted to wander away to personal associations, one’s interest in the text will suffer. A feedback loop seems to be at work here, then. If we accept that reminders are a type of mind wandering in the first place, then, this feedback loop supports another idea put forward by Irving and Thompson, namely that mind wandering, albeit unguided, can in principle be task-related. The task at hand in reading: letting a narrative wash through one’s mind.

PISA and similar projects keep reporting a worrisome link between students’ degree of social advantage and their ability to read, especially with pleasure. From a very early age, excellence in literacy seems to be reserved for the socially privileged. The standard explanation is that due to environmental factors, disadvantaged readers lack academic dispositions in a narrow sense: the ability to focus, pursue goals, think critically, and so forth. This is probably true. A complementary question, arising from my view that reading is a particular form of self-consciousness, is whether these low-performing readers might also be lacking in their capacity to think, with depth and pleasure, about *themselves* as they read (and perhaps also in general). A literary and reading pedagogy embracing, rather than deriding, reminders and self-reflection would be a first

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan W. Schooler, Erik D. Reichle, and David V. Halpern, “Zoning Out While Reading: Evidence for Dissociations between Experience and Metacognition,” in *Thinking and Seeing: Visual Metacognition in Adults and Children*, ed. Daniel T. Levin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004): pp. 203-226.

<sup>16</sup> Zachary C. Irving and Evan Thompson, “The Philosophy of Mind-Wandering,” in *Oxford Handbook of Spontaneous Thought and Creativity*, eds. Kieran Fox and Kalina Christoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

step toward redressing such imbalance. One of the probes to be introduced prior to reading would then be the question: “What does this remind you of – in your self?”

### Reading as a Way of Being in a Place

The last idea that I would like to revisit is that reading transports you away – that is, decouples your consciousness – from your immediate environment. While it is certainly relevant to think about literature as adventurous mental travel, and while the metaphor has great pedagogical interest especially in early reading promotion, it is sometimes taken too literally.

In measuring attention during narrative reading, for instance, researchers widely administer questionnaires such as the Transportation Scale or Narrative Engagement Scale. These questionnaires ask readers to rate, in retrospect, how aware they were of their reading environment. Attention to text is then simply assumed to be *inversely* related to scores given to statements of place awareness, as in the following example: “While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind.”<sup>17</sup> The underlying view is that the physical place has little to add, other than distraction, to one’s conscious experience of a written narrative. In some parts of the world, accordingly, silent literary reading is practiced communally in primary and secondary classrooms under the assumption that a controlled environment free from stimuli optimally supports concentration. And to get the most out of reading in their spare time, pupils are advised literally to shut the door on their otherwise stimulating world.

Yet it is a simplification to think that when we read, all things outside the text, or outside our virtual stock of reminders for that matter, are necessarily distracting. Often enough the place where we read is an integral part of our story experience in a positive sense. For instance, think of the places where you typically read for leisure. How do they sound? Most probably they are not absolutely quiet, as such places are hard to find in natural conditions, and actually difficult to be in without training. Now let us recall Susan Blackmore’s

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<sup>17</sup> Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000): pp. 701–721, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701.

proposal about consciousness. What it implies is that the inconspicuous soundscapes of our mundane life – the hum of traffic outside your building, birds screeching somewhere further away – only *seem* to have been outside your consciousness once you finally look up from the book you have been reading. The reason for this is that they are not as easily remembered in the illusory form of a stream. Nevertheless, they may have been part of your reading experience all the while. Another philosopher of consciousness, Eric Schwitzgebel, has run ingenious experiments in which he asked participants to introspect in response to trigger signals generated at random intervals while carrying out their usual activities. He found that some of the time consciousness indeed appears to encompass unattended phenomena that are unrelated to one’s immediate activity, such as bird screech in the background.<sup>18</sup>

At less abstract levels, one fact challenging the idea of the reading consciousness as decoupled from physical environment is that readers often have strong opinions about places to read. Some, but by no means all of these opinions, have to do with noise levels and soundscapes.

With a group of collaborators, I have run a study exploring students’ reading behaviors from a spatial angle.<sup>19</sup> It yielded a number of insights. For instance, many if not most participants reported seeking out white noise (nature sounds, music, voices in public spaces) to accompany their reading for both leisure and study purposes. Importantly, this was often linked to a preference for sharing their reading space with other people, as well as to sensitivity to what those people were doing. Apparently readers experience reading as a highly situated activity, and also as a distinct way of claiming and inhabiting a place. In this light, having pupils read silently in classrooms may seem a good choice from the communal sharing point of view, but less so if the classrooms are too quiet.

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<sup>18</sup> Eric Schwitzgebel, “Do you Have Constant Tactile Experience of Your Feet in Your Shoes? Or is Experience Limited to What’s in Attention?,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 14, no. 3 (2007): pp. 5–35.

<sup>19</sup> Anežka Kuzmičová, Patrícia Dias, Ana Vogrinčič Čepič, Anne-Mette Albrechtslund, André Casado, Marina Kotrla Topić, Xavier Mínguez López, Skans Kersti Nilsson, Inês Teixeira-Botelho, “Reading and Company: Embodiment and Social Space in Silent Reading Practices,” *Literacy* (ePub ahead of print, 2017), doi:10.1111/lit.12131.

Elsewhere I have detailed how the physical environment can also inform readers' consciousness by way of reinforcing mental imagery, that is, when one's physical situation somehow corresponds to the setting or contents of the story being experienced.<sup>20</sup> For instance, if I knew where to look for the laundress story in print and read it on the Elbe bank I used to go to as a child, or near any other river for that matter, my mental images of it would likely be even more vivid. This effect would not necessarily depend on me actually hearing the river (in my memories, the Elbe is perfectly still), or seeing it peripherally in the moment of experiencing the story; the sheer sense of its physical proximity would probably suffice to prop my mental imagery. This principle of environmental propping has a wealth of possible applications in reading pedagogy as teachers can evoke story settings through various priming techniques and classroom adjustments. They can also inspire pupils to experiment with different reading environments in their spare time so as to enhance their story experience.

In my hypothetical propping scenario, the serendipitous sense of a nearby river merging in my consciousness with the fictitious river might also further reinforce future memories of my physical encounter with the story. But as it happens, although I heard the laundress story nowhere near a water resource, I still remember this encounter fairly well. After many years I still know where, when, and from whom I heard the anecdote. I am not suggesting that all past narrative experiences are as intimately tied in memory to where they took place. But some are, and clearly not only those propped by congruent settings. Perhaps certain life circumstances support such highly situated forms of reading consciousness, a view also held by astute consciousness observer Marcel Proust in his essay *On Reading*:

what our childhood reading leaves behind in us is above all the image of the *places* and *days* where and when we engaged in it. I have not escaped its sorcery: intending to speak about reading I have spoken of everything

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<sup>20</sup> Anežka Kuzmičová, "Does it Matter Where You Read? Situating Narrative in Physical Environment," *Communication Theory* 26, no. 3 (2016): pp. 290-308, doi:10.1111/comt.12084.

but books, because it is not of books that the reading itself has spoken to me.<sup>21</sup>

Proust's observation, then, is where the three strands of this chapter come together. It chimes with evidence of readers looking for "themselves" in literature in sensitive times especially, as a way of coping or identity formation. Childhood and young adulthood, the life period in which the foundations of our reading habits and abilities are laid, happens to be one such sensitive time. Additionally, as young readers are busy tackling literacy acquisition in a technical sense, their reading consciousness is also likely bound to be the most unruly and the least amenable to the neat container metaphor. Educators may more or less intuit this double exceptionality. The challenge is exploring it to the pupils' benefit – when teaching, designing tests, and setting the physical stage of their narrative experiences. In digital times, when reading and text are becoming mobile to a degree that would have baffled the sedentary experiencer Proust, we must remember to worry not only about the notorious depth of the mind's container, but also about the reach and agility of the sieve that is the reading consciousness.

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<sup>21</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading*, trans. Damion Searls (London: Hesperus Press, 2011): p. 18. My italics.

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